

Remote But Not Removed

Professional Networks That Support Rural Educators



BY DANETTE PARSLEY

Alex Andrews teaches high school English in an Alaskan village along the Bering Sea, roughly 400 miles west of Anchorage. Of the village's 750 residents, almost all are Alaska natives. Poverty is high in the area, and many residents hunt and fish for their sustenance. As a social activity, students like to play basketball. Many have never left the village.

Partly because of the vast distances between communities that have no access to roads, the students Andrews teaches in the Lower Kuskokwim School District can feel cut off from the rest of the world. The district is about the same size geographically as the entire state of Ohio. As a result, students don't get many opportunities to meet others beyond their immediate community.

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Isolation doesn't just affect students, however. Teachers in remote rural areas also don't get many opportunities to communicate and collaborate with other teachers. "I felt stranded," Andrews says of his first years teaching in western Alaska. "It was as if no one else was going through the same struggles."

Across the country, slightly more than 25 percent of public schools are classified as rural, and approximately one out of every 15 schools is located in a remote setting more than 25 miles away from the nearest population center.* While the daily interactions between students and teachers might mirror that of their urban and suburban counterparts, the conditions that rural teachers face differ a great deal.

For example, in the Pacific Northwest, stories abound of rural teachers wearing many hats because school staffs are small. Districts also struggle to find qualified teachers willing to move to remote areas. Most significant, though, is that teachers face extreme isolation. It's not uncommon for a rural teacher to be

*See "Number of Public Elementary and Secondary Schools, by School Urban-Centric 12-Category Locale and State or Jurisdiction: 2013-14," in National Center for Education Statistics, *Rural Education in America*, table A.1.a.-2, accessed September 13, 2017, <https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/ruraled/tables/A.1.a.-2.asp>.

the *only* third-grade teacher or the *only* social studies teacher in a district with fewer than 400 kids. In many rural areas, the nearest teacher for the same grade level or content area might work 100 miles away. This kind of isolation makes it hard for teachers to bounce ideas off colleagues who teach in similar contexts or to receive professional development.[†] And it can put quite a bit of stress on novice teachers, who are also trying to adjust to a new profession.

“My first year teaching was the hardest year of my life,” says an educator from rural Idaho. “I questioned my decision to become a teacher.”

Rather than let the challenges caused by teacher isolation persist, a number of groups in the Pacific Northwest, led by Educa-

tion Northwest, where I work, decided to join together and create a vehicle for collaboration. The groups—including state education agencies and a handful of small rural districts that accepted our invitation to participate—decided to establish a professional network of rural educators with the goal of providing support to help their colleagues succeed and encourage them to stay in the profession. Thus, the Northwest Rural Innovation and Student Engagement (NW RISE) Network was created.

With the network now in its fourth year, we are seeing the powerful difference it’s making for both teachers and students. For example, Andrews and his students engaged in a project crafted with his NW RISE colleagues called “Day in the Life.” The purpose was for students from remote areas to engage with each other over their daily schedules and routines. Andrews’s students used an online discussion board, writing posts about their interests, hobbies, and experiences living in a rural community. They also shared descriptions of their lives—with some students presenting their daily activities through PowerPoint presentations and time-lapse videos.

“The project gave students from multiple states greater insight and much more personal perspective on the lives of their peers who were also living in small rural communities,” Andrews says. “Many students at the start of the project wrote something along the lines of, ‘I don’t enjoy living in a rural community because there is nothing to do, and everybody knows everybody’s business.’ That was blown out of the water once the students began to respond to each other. It was as if they began to see through the eyes of others not just how unique their personal experiences were but also how similar they were to others living in similar areas and communities.”

The network also enabled Andrews to partner with fellow educators who felt isolated. Thanks to NW RISE, he can now share instructional practices and educational resources as well as engage in meaningful discussions about teaching and learning—things many educators in urban and suburban areas take for granted. The network “gives me a boost by showing me that I’m not alone,” he says. “There are people in my corner, and I can do this.”

In this article, I take stock of what we have learned in the four years since we helped establish the network. I also share our key

takeaways to help other groups interested in creating education networks with similar goals. While these lessons and strategies stem from our experience of specifically leading a network of rural educators, much of what we have learned could readily apply to other groups of educators looking to benefit from connecting with others.



Teachers in remote rural areas don't get many opportunities to communicate and collaborate with other teachers.

Making Connections to Strengthen Teaching and Learning

Educator networks are not a new idea, but the concept has really taken off in the last few years as a strategy for increasing innovation and building community. Because access to collaborative opportunities is limited in rural districts, networks are particularly promising for those districts.

At Education Northwest, a nonprofit providing applied research and technical assistance services for more than 50 years, our role has been to plant the seeds of NW RISE and provide “backbone” support, such as facilitating meetings, while intentionally stepping back and letting the network determine its own direction.

Our purpose in the beginning was to foster a sense of professional belonging among educators from rural and remote districts, providing a space for teachers to hone classroom practices and increase student engagement. After starting in 2013 with nine small school districts (averaging about 225 students each) in Alaska, Idaho, Oregon, and Washington, the network now includes more than 30 school systems and serves as a professional community connecting rural teacher leaders, principals, and superintendents as well as state education agency staff members in the Northwest.

[†]For more about educator collaboration, see the Summer 2017 issue of *American Educator*, available at www.aft.org/sites/default/files/ae_summer2017_ed_reform.pdf.

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When we started, we had an evidence base to guide us but no actual blueprint for how to put together a rural educator network. Some models now exist, but there still isn't much information on how to create education networks from scratch, particularly those that bring together geographically dispersed rural educators.

We started with a dual premise: that teachers are the most important within-school factor that affects student learning and achievement, and that teachers working with teachers is key for improving instructional practice. Given that rural schools often have only one teacher per grade level or content area, and offer educators rare opportunities to share resources and best practices with colleagues in similar roles, we designed the network to offset these challenges.

Early on, NW RISE decided to have teacher leaders and administrators work together in groups composed of colleagues in similar positions from other districts. While members of these groups mainly interact virtually, they also meet face-to-face during the network's semiannual meetings, facilitated by Education Northwest.

Both online and in person, such work enables teachers like Amy Hill to share resources, learn new skills, and acquire new contacts for their colleagues back home. Hill teaches second grade in the Glenns Ferry School District near the Snake River in Idaho. In a community of fewer than 2,000 people, she says that the school is the heart of the town.

By participating in NW RISE, Hill says she has grown as an educator and that it has made a positive difference in the way she teaches. In particular, she points to her collaborations with other elementary school teachers, from both Idaho and outside the

state, as crucial. For example, a project on sharing information about each school helped her students learn about other areas outside of their own. It helped her students see how other small schools are like theirs and how they are different. "When you have that kind of connection, you can bounce ideas off each other," she says. "You get encouragement, and you know where you can get help." After an NW RISE in-person meeting, Hill leaves rejuvenated and full of ideas about things to try in her classroom. At the most recent meeting in June 2017, for instance, she learned how to merge academic, social, and emotional learning, and now regularly uses that approach in her classroom.

It's common for members of NW RISE to tell us the network is reversing some of the effects of isolation. When we ask teachers for feedback, they often emphasize how invaluable it is to connect with peers who are "just like them" and really understand their teaching situation. It paves the way for different, more meaningful conversations that lead to changes in practice. For example, one teacher



noted that when districts partnered to create a common writing rubric that students could use to score each other's work and provide feedback, student engagement increased and teachers gained greater insight into writing instruction and student progress.

One of the most significant findings of our annual member survey shows the positive effects of teacher collaboration across districts and states. More than 90 percent of teachers participating in this year's survey reported that their participation in NW RISE has increased their access to useful ideas and resources (with half of those teachers reporting this case to a "great extent"). Additionally, four out of five teachers indicated that they use ideas and resources from NW RISE in daily practice.

We also learned about the way NW RISE strengthens educator relationships within the same district or school. Roughly three-quarters of teachers in this year's survey said that NW RISE participation has increased collaboration with district peers. Approximately the same number reported that NW RISE has benefited classroom practice in their school by increasing their desire to find helpful resources and share with colleagues outside their school.

Quite a few NW RISE educators have commented how funny it now seems that it took joining a cross-state network spanning a vast geography to connect with schools just down the road. Clusters of districts within relative proximity now enjoy extending their network connections. For example, one group of Idaho districts now pools resources to bring in speakers and engage in professional development activities, such as book studies, that bring educators from a range of districts together. This helps stretch limited resources while building another layer of network support closer to home.

Of course, students are the ultimate beneficiaries of their teachers' participation in NW RISE activities. More than 90 percent of teachers report that NW RISE has improved student engagement in their school, with roughly the same number indicating that NW RISE has improved student learning in their school. Students participate in a wide range of activities based on

their teachers participating in NW RISE, including cooperative learning in which students analyze each other's work through technologies such as Google Docs and Skype.

Just as important, the network enables teachers to develop and carry out project-based learning.* For example, science students from various NW RISE schools took field trips to local power sources and made videos of their visits, which they then shared with their peers at a distance. Such projects can increase student engagement, as the students who made these videos became fully involved in the project so they could make sure the students outside their communities could learn just as much from the experience as they did.

Lessons Learned

As I mentioned earlier, we started NW RISE guided by evidence but without a specific blueprint to follow. Nevertheless, we have learned so much over the last four years:

Invest time in planning. Once we hatched the idea for a network and assembled a core group of folks committed to making it a reality, we were eager to get to the launch point. But because our participating members came from a wide geographic region with different priorities and contexts, it was crucial to spend substantial time and energy to create a shared vision and common goals.

Centralize coordination, decentralize leadership and action. It's crucial for members to freely collaborate with minimal outside interference. Education Northwest's role as network organizer, or the "backbone" of the network, is to provide essential logistical support so members can focus on the work of the network. We also bring in network experts Andy Hargreaves and Dennis Shirley, from Boston College, as partners who help the network meet its goals and provide participants with access to evidence-based practices and outside examples. We steer lightly, helping empower the network to develop its own direction. As a result, we have seen the steering committee and other network leaders over time take more and more ownership of the network.

Provide members plenty of autonomy and support to maximize time and benefits of collaboration. All formal NW RISE activities are designed to maximize collaboration time. In the early stages, however, some "job-alike groups," which include teachers from the same grade or subject area, asked for a higher level of structured support to get going. To meet that request, we started providing optional discussion and planning templates for each working session. We want to ensure members spend the bulk of their time and energy focused on what they want to accomplish.

Recruit with care. When creating a network with sustainability and potential expansion in mind, it's important to choose the first round of participants carefully. A personal approach can go a long way. During the formation of NW RISE, one state education

agency staff member reached out personally to district leaders with whom she had collaborated previously. She followed up those initial conversations with formal invitations, an approach that proved more successful than that of another state where staff members found little interest in forming a network after making initial contact through a form email.

It's also important to recruit participants who have some key commonalities to help encourage engagement and keep activities relevant. For NW RISE, we sought out small, rural, and isolated K-12 districts. We are now at the point that recruitment happens very naturally—often with individual members talking with peers about this vibrant community that they help create and lead.

Consider ways to manage growth. We launched the network with a relatively small number of highly invested, motivated districts willing to try translating the initial network design into reality. The first year was filled with lots of excitement along with some challenges that led to productive design adjustments.

It quickly became clear that what the teachers and administrators value most about the network is the opportunity to talk with colleagues from other towns who are experiencing similar issues and have similar roles. Because of this, these "job-alike" groups became a central organizing feature. At the same time, we faced the challenge of not having enough members in certain grade levels and subject areas for all of these groups to be successful. So now we carefully monitor job-alike membership and spread the word to district members when a particular group could benefit from additional members.



The steering committee also carefully deliberated about how much and how fast to grow the network. If we remained too small for too long, we risked limiting the stimulation and diversity needed to meet member needs. And if we grew too fast, we risked the loss of network identity and the special "small community" feel that makes participating so appealing. Ultimately, we decided that growing over the course of four years to about 40 school sites seemed about right.

Build in evidence gathering early on. It's important to begin evaluating activities and outcomes as early as possible—but not
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*For more on project-based learning, see "Project-Based Instruction" in the Fall 2016 issue of *American Educator*, available at www.aft.org/ae/fall2016/duke.

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before members are ready. Network leaders might hesitate to collect data (such as evidence of student achievement, classroom instructional artifacts, job-alike project plans, and member perceptions) from the get-go because they fear participants might feel too vulnerable, or they worry about detracting from the network's core purpose. It won't take long, however, for members and sponsors to feel the need for data and evidence to improve the network, monitor progress toward meeting stated goals, and gauge levels of return on resource investments.

Diversify funding while maintaining mission integrity. While educator passion and expertise drive the best forms of teacher professional development, obtaining funds to cover items such as teacher time and travel is almost always a challenge. When building a network, it's a major responsibility of the network leaders and the backbone organization to create a stable resource base so that participants can focus on developing professionally and collaboratively without funding distractions.

Often, networks start with a single source of funding and build from there. In the case of NW RISE, we started with some funds from the U.S. Department of Education-funded Northwest Comprehensive Center* as well as some modest but critically important member travel support from state education agencies. Since then, districts have emphasized the importance of contributing and have taken on resource commitments, such as paying for substitute teachers to allow time for teachers to collaborate with network peers. We have also begun to diversify funding by partnering with local foundations with complementary goals.

As we look ahead, we aim to grow NW RISE—as a network and as a concept—over the coming years.

When we think of growth, we plan not only to increase the number of sites that participate in NW RISE but also to expand the network's active participation within sites. The goals are to increase the number of opportunities for teachers to find collaborators by bringing more districts and schools into the fold and to build the capacity of existing network members to increase student engagement and professional learning within their district or school.

We also look forward to supporting the formation of NW RISE subnetworks. These subnetworks mostly include state affiliates of NW RISE or subsets of districts near each other.

One powerful example is from Alaska's Lower Kuskokwim School District, where Alex Andrews teaches. Because the district is made up of 22 remote villages, the district itself has formed LK RISE based on a similar network model and guided by teacher leaders who have been active participants in NW RISE.

We take pride in the organic formation of subnetworks like these that are designed to meet regional needs or specific interests. Our hope is that, through NW RISE and other emerging networks, all rural educators will have the opportunity to find each other, collaborate, and grow professionally, with the goal of promoting student engagement and success for rural students wherever they may be. □

*To read more about the center, see <http://nwcc.educationnorthwest.org>.